When Do We Eat?

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Of the many questions in the Passover seder—the Four Questions, the questions of the Four Children, questions for discussion along the way—the most common question is, of course, "When do we eat?" The question is hardly trivial. Human beings eat for a variety of reasons: survival, energy, pleasure, comfort, sacrament. What does the act and idea of eating tell us about the Passover seder and its spiritual meaning?

The most historical of festivals, Passover is celebrated in a timeless manner. Although the Bible is concerned with chronology, origins, development, and consequences, rabbinic Judaism was markedly ahistorical, envisioning all key events as occurring in a fixed present. Historical sequence, growth, or change are irrelevant. From Orthodoxy to liberal Judaism, we tend to seek the religious meaning of texts and rituals not by studying their evolution but by exploring their psychological value, their "life-messages." Only historians ask: where did this originate, how and why did it change? But historical insight, too, may offer spiritual meaning.

Take the question, "When do we eat?" The essence of the earliest celebrations of Pesach was a primitive, cultic fellowship meal. Israelites were enjoined to select a lamb or kid, kill it, and "eat the meat that night, roasted with fire, with matzah and maror" (EXODUS 12:8). The *Korban Pesach*, the Passover sacrifice, was performed at twilight and the meal eaten at night, in a group, at home. Those who ate the lamb communed with God through the very eating of the meat—a spiritual "eating experience."

The "telling experience"—the Haggadah or "story"—was secondary. In the earliest celebration of Passover it followed the eating experience. The Torah itself indicates this clearly. Beginning in Exodus 12:8, the Torah tells us to eat the Korban Pesach and instructs us in detail on how to eat it. Only after seeing us observe these rites does the Torah imagine that our children will ask

us, "What is this ritual to you?" (EXODUS 12:24-27), thereby launching the telling of the story. Thus, in the Torah's conception, we eat first, and tell the story of the Exodus second.

At some point, the Pesach sacrifice was moved from each person's home to a national celebration centralized in Jerusalem. The lamb was killed in the Temple and roasted at the homes or inns of the pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for this purpose. Even then, however, the sequence of eat-first-tell-later continued. During the Second Temple period, the seder was modeled into a banquet or symposium following the cultural practices of the empires that ruled Judea (Persian, Greek, then Roman). The banquet began with wine (what we know as the Kiddush), then hors d'oeuvres (what we know as Karpas), followed by the main course (i.e., the lamb with matzah and maror). After this meal, there were questions and the telling of the story (i.e., what we know of as the Magid section of the Haggadah). The order, description, and sequence of detail in Mishnah Pesachim demonstrates that eating occurred before telling even in Tannaitic times.

This explains the puzzling statement in the Mishnah (M. PES. 10:8) and the Haggadah: *Eyn maftirin achar ha-Pesach afikoman*, which might be translated as: "One should not rush to the Afikoman course after eating the Korban Pesach." The Afikoman was a course of drinking, socializing, and dessert in an ancient banquet. We are being told: after you finish eating, you should stay and tell the story, not just skip to socializing. The danger was that, since the eating was at the beginning, the participants might not remain for the Haggadah.

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE fundamentally changed Passover observance because the Korban Pesach—a central Jewish sacrament—could no longer be performed. There were (at least) three different reactions among the Jews to this change.

The Zealots urged that Judea rebel against Rome, rebuild the Temple, and rapidly restore the Korban Pesach. This view had important advocates, but was doomed to failure after the Bar Kochva Revolt of 135 CE.

The Jewish Christian sect asserted that Jesus was the Korban Pesach. This idea developed into the practice of the Eucharist, and Gentile Christianity absorbed this ritual as its central sacrament.

A third response was the dictum of Rabban Gamliel who said: "All those who have not recited these three things (or words) on Passover have not fulfilled their obligation, and these are: Pesach, Matzah, and Maror." (M. PES. 10:5) Gamliel pointedly does not require the eating of these three foods, only uttering their names. Talking about these three items becomes equivalent to eating them. The mystery cult of eating a lamb in communion with God is replaced by study or talk—in effect, as Rabbi David Fine has taught, an intellectual course. This rabbinic path represents the survival of Judaism. Eating and telling merge, in a sense.

With the loss of the Korban Pesach, over time the structure of the seder changed. The meal (which we know as *Shulchan Orekh*) was moved, taking place after the telling of the story. This was done to reflect the reduced importance of the meal, since it was no longer a cultic, sacrificial meal. This shift also helped prevent Jews from trying to replicate the Korban Pesach by killing and roasting a lamb at home, as some were doing after the destruction of the Temple. Finally, the meal may have been moved to make sure that participants did not leave before the Haggadah.

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The loss of the Korban Pesach was not total. A remnant of the Korban Pesach, in its original timing in the seder, is the Yachatz, the breaking of the "middle" matzah. The Yachatz procedure has no root in the Torah or the Mishnah, although attempts to give it such an origin have been made. The "broken" character of the Yachatz corresponds to the sacrifice of the Korban Pesach. Its "lost" nature—it is the part of the matzah that is hidden—corresponds to the sense that our central sacrament is permanently lost. The tendency to substitute matzah for a lamb—already begun in the Mishnah and in Christianity—is continued.

However, in a hopeful note, after the meal when the Haggadah turns messianic, we "find" the Yachatz (now called the Afikoman) and eat it. The light-hearted nature of this final course masks its serious intent. The Yachatz-turned-Afikoman substitutes for, and subconsciously reminds Jews of, the Korban Pesach. This is why a piece of the Afikoman retains a certain sanctity, and why some Sephardim accompany the eating of the Afikoman with a statement that it is in memory of the eating of the Korban Pesach. Medieval

halakhah interpreted the Mishnah as forbidding eating after the Afikoman. The practice is emotional, not logical, since two more cups of wine with socializing are still permitted after the Afikoman (preserving the original banquet form).

The seder ends with the late medieval Had Gadya, "One Kid." While many interpretations exist, the simplest is that Had Gadya reminds us of the slaughter of the Korban Pesach, which, after all, was a young lamb or goat (EXODUS 12:5). Since this ballad allows the slaughter of a kid to actually reappear at the end of the seder, it expresses the Jewish messianic hope that the original Passover meal of the Korban Pesach will be restored. The sacrifice continues, albeit now in a song. At the same time, the song suggests that other "animals" (Gentile nations) have "killed" our goat, that is, suppressed the Korban Pesach, but that in the end God will suppress these nations.

Ironically, delaying the seder meal until after the telling of the story has only served to emphasize the meal in the minds of many participants, at the expense of the telling. On a practical level, there are various ways around this dilemma, such as enhancing the Karpas into a more filling salad course to allay hunger. But the recurring question of "When do we eat?" can be considered to have a spiritual value. The question focuses on the original purpose of the seder, which was to eat together in a sense of holiness and communion.

How could we more directly connect eating and spirituality at the seder? Participants may be asked to close their eyes while eating the ritual foods. *Nigunim* could be sung or, at the opposite extreme, the eating may be in stark silence. Either dramatic effect would underscore the difference between this type of ritual consumption and secular "snacking." Eating mindfully may require some change in the arbitrary way many of us eat in a society where food is so abundant. For instance, we could encourage participants to eat more slowly, to eat less, or to eat the halakhically prescribed portion of each ritual food. To stress the fellowship nature of the meal, we might hold hands during each food's blessing, or eat our portions simultaneously. These theatrical devices may be particularly important in front of children, who are sensitive to the eating patterns they witness.

Meditations or *kavannot* may be introduced to focus our minds on the holiness of each act of eating. One (very rabbinic) approach is to pretend that the matzah and maror course is akin to the Korban Pesach. During each ritual course, we might ask ourselves to imagine specific events in the story of

deliverance. For instance, a guided meditation could lead participants to "remember" the actual walk out of Egypt as they eat the matzah. A radical step would be to reorganize the entire telling around the different parts of the eating. Even during the central meal, the eating and telling could be combined by directing the conversation toward some continuation of the Haggadah. Alternatively, our personal conversations could be publicly recognized as part of the sacrament.

Connecting eating with spirituality presents more of a challenge today than when sacrificial meals engendered a feeling of deliverance and brought us closer to the divine. A direct approach is to acknowledge the importance of the question "When do we eat?" and actually discuss it at the seder. Understanding the development and history, with its dialectic of change and continuity, may make us conscious that the seder foods are a holy meal in which the presence of a family or community represents the presence of God.

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